



**postmarks**

fall  
2009

**Listen to performances any time**

If you missed the "Beyond Cool" performance of Mile Davis' "Bobplicity" at last year's Allerton Music Barn Festival, or the Opera Program's production of "Cosi fan tutte" last spring at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, all is not lost.

Those performances – and many more by faculty members, students and guest artists of the UI School of Music – are accessible online through the UI School of Music's new Media Center at [www.music.uiuc.edu/media](http://www.music.uiuc.edu/media). A virtual trove of archival performances – some audio-only, some video – went live on the school's Web site in March.

"This is a concerted effort – no pun intended – to have all of our flagship ensembles and faculty recitals accessible to the world," said Karl Kramer, the school's director.

In addition to past performances by faculty and guests artists, the site features concerts by university bands, orchestras and choirs, as well as opera productions. Also featured are selections from programs of annual events, including the Allerton Music Barn and Summer Jazz festivals.

Kramer said the site's intended audience is broad and diverse. "There's a huge audience – from current university students and faculty and staff members to alumni, researchers, prospective faculty and the community."

**First Class**

# A taste of Italy: Advertising students learn first hand

By Craig Chamberlain

**R**avioli, rigatoni, mostaccioli, spaghetti, pizza. Just saying the words can make you hungry. What is it about Italian food? And what can the Italians teach us about food?

Seventeen students went to the source for answers last summer, spending 3 1/2 busy weeks in historic Rome and the Cilento region in the south, all of it part of a course focused on food and the country's rich food culture.

They ate, of course, and sampled ... and ate some more. And went to lectures about the history, economics and social customs of food in Italy, most delivered by professor Fabio Parasecoli, who also served as a guide to Rome's foodscape.

But they also spent hands-on time at farms and a vineyard, visited a dock where locals came each day for fresh seafood, toured the business of a caterer who sometimes serves the Vatican, and got lessons and a meal from celebrity chef Laura Ravaioli, described as the Rachael Ray of Italy.

They made their own bread, picked wheat and grapes, saw how authentic mozzarella cheese is made from the milk of water buffalo, and got lessons on olive oil and artichokes and different styles of pizza.

They immersed themselves in Italian food culture.

No, this wasn't part of a new UI culinary institute, but rather a study-abroad advertising course, "Branding Italian Cuisine." (<http://will.illinois.edu/rome2009>).

The immersion was necessary because branding a product or place, for the purpose of selling others on its value, requires understanding it from the ground up, says Diana Mincyte, the advertising professor who led the course. It's learning the "narrative underneath whatever product or thing you're trying to sell," said one of her students.

"One of the challenges was to really understand what it is about Italy and its food culture that has

become such an attractive and powerful brand," Mincyte said.

"We wanted the students to ask 'What kind of consumer culture is this? What drives it? What is very special about it that enables such a unique distribution of food, that enables such a different food culture?'"

Perhaps the first difference students noticed was that the Italian food there was not the Italian food they

knew. "Most of the food students ate, in places that our guides led us to, was very unfamiliar," Mincyte said. "They had no idea what it was."

Amanda Spizzirri, a sophomore broadcast journalism major from Crestwood, Ill., is proud of her family's Italian roots and core Italian values. "We're very close as a family and we're very loud," she said with a smile.

But when it comes to the Italian food she grew up on, and that she often cooks for friends, she learned on the trip "we're a bunch of frauds."

Kelly Necastro, a senior from Barrington, Ill., majoring in media studies, also from Italian heritage, made a similar observation.

Matt Druker, a senior advertising major from Northbrook, Ill., observed in a blog entry for the course that olive oil plays a small role in "Americanized" Italian food, yet is "one of Italian food culture's most treasured items." Before the trip, he could not have judged good olive oil from bad, he wrote, but after a brief lecture, "all of our senses have been heightened in order to appreciate olive oil for all that it is worth."

American-Italian food tends to be much heavier, with more meat and carbs, Mincyte said. In Italy, the food tends to be lighter and based more around vegetables, especially those in season, she said.

The fact is there is no one authentic Italian food, something that makes the country "a very special place for food" and one of the world's key food culture centers, Mincyte said. Dishes vary by region, and food production and distribution also are regionally based, she said. "Every town differs in terms of their pasta selections and how they make sauces. The same dishes that are made in Rome will be very different 20 miles away."

"There are hundreds of different types of pasta," Necastro said. "You go into the local shops and you'll see shapes you never even could think of."



*In the Cilento region of southern Italy, students got a tour of the kitchens at Intavola, a gourmet catering business, after a lesson there on the Mediterranean diet.*

Photo by Amanda Spizzirri



Photo by Amanda Spizzirri

*Students on their first group dinner on their own in Rome.*

The course was timely, Mincyte

said, because "gastronomic culture is exploding." There is new and growing attention on how food is produced, shipped and prepared, and the culture that surrounds it, she said – demonstrated in trends toward organic food, buying locally and the slow food movement.

Her own research focuses on how communities and cultures are formed and defined around issues of food. Informing that research is her experience growing up in Lithuania before and after it broke off from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. In the transition, she saw how the supply and distribution of food changed radically, and getting enough was not always a sure thing.

Italy is a great case study for food, Mincyte said, because it never left its tradition of small farms, local suppliers, and a focus on quality over quantity.

For Necastro, who prefers her food organic, it was ideal. "A key thing that I really became aware of through this trip was how different our relationship to food is here compared to theirs," she said. She saw a closer bond to the animal and the land, a focus on freshness, knowing where your food comes from, and care in preparation. "It's just real simple, quality fresh food, where you can really sense the ingredients," she said.

For Spizzirri, who once had her eye on culinary school, and thought about it again several times during the trip, there weren't enough superlatives. The olive oil was "amazing," the coffee "phenomenal." "I think they just take pride in what they do," she said. "They don't focus on technology and mass production like we do. ... It shocks me that they're able to maintain that."

Both students also were struck by the social life that surrounds food in Italy. "They embrace the whole process and use it more as a social tool," Spizzirri said. "They have these three-hour-long meals and nothing's rushed."

Mincyte taught the spring course that prepared students for the trip, and led the trip itself, but it would not have been possible without GustoLab, a school in Rome devoted to educating foreign students and tourists about Italian food culture.

"These kinds of experiences, you would spend years living there and you wouldn't be able to find," Mincyte said, "but because they are focusing on food education and gastronomy, they have these networks that we were able to plug into." ■